

## **SMART MONEY**

# **NOWORKER LEFT BEHIND HELPS DISPLACEDWORKERS PURSUE AN EDUCATION**

**Detroit Free Press  
September 30, 2007  
By Kevin Ransom**

Layoffs, buyouts, early retirements, cutbacks, plant closings – with all the workforce reduction efforts Michigan has seen in the last two years, tens of thousands of workers have been forced to find new jobs or pursue new career paths. But before many of these displaced workers can start over, they need to be educated in their new fields.

The State of Michigan has made an attempt to jump-start the economy – and help regular folks improve their lives – by offering assistance via the No Worker Left Behind program. Announced in August, the program offers these new students up to \$5,000 per year for two years to cover tuition and other education expenses as they work toward an associate's degree or a vocational-school certificate. All of the state's 28 community colleges are participating, as are four-year institutions and vocational and proprietary schools. Those who received buyout packages from previous employers also are eligible. The program will be in effect until 2010.

"Michigan has 350,000 unemployed workers at any given moment – plus many more who are underemployed and low-income," says Andy Levin, deputy director of the Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Growth. At the same time, many Michigan employers need workers trained for specific fields, he says, citing work in ethanol plants and hospitals as examples. "No Worker Left Behind is designed to help Michigan's workers retool their skills at precisely the moment when the workers and our economy need it most," Levin says.

Michael Greca, 33, of Ypsilanti, is a former Lear Corp. worker training for a new career path with the help of NWLB. Greca worked as an assembler at two Lear plants in Romulus before being laid off in June, another casualty of Detroit's declining auto-industry fortunes. An auto supplier, Lear manufactures seating systems.

Greca decided "it was time to get out of manufacturing," and in late August, attended his first classes at Washtenaw Community College, with a goal of earning an associate's degree in accounting. Besides an accounting class, he's taking courses this term in public speaking, physics and computer information systems, he says.

Greca's career goal is to become an accountant, and he might pursue a bachelor's degree in finance or accounting. He likes the NWLB program, he says, "because it will help me get out of manufacturing and get a piece of paper that says I know a skill or a trade, and that's what employers are looking for these days."

Linda Blakey, associate vice president of student services for Washtenaw Community College, where 48 students this fall are receiving tuition assistance from NWLB, praises the program. "It's not good for people to be working at minimum-wage jobs, or not working at all. So if we retrain or re-educate people so they can be more productive and earn a better living, that's good for the individual, good for the state, and good for the community," says Blakey.

Linda West, director of Henry Ford Community College's Michigan Technical Education Center, concurs, calling NWLB "an innovative concept" and adding that "colleges like [HFCC] should be involved in this kind of program, because we specialize in training people for high-demand, high-skill careers ... particularly in health care and technology." Twelve students have enrolled at HFCC this fall under the NWLB program.

Another NWLB participant is David Weglarz, 57, of Grosse Pointe Woods, who was laid off in February 2006 after 20 years designing parts for Ford Motor Co.

"After high school, I immediately got a job as a draftsman, and for many years from the 1960s to 1980s, I was working 50 to 60 hours a week," says Weglarz. "So I never got a degree. But now that jobs are harder to come by, I'm finding that not having a degree is a stumbling block in terms of getting hired."

Weglarz intends to begin classes in mid-October at Macomb Community College, working toward an associate's degree in design that will teach him computer-aided design software, metallurgy and product design. "Those new skills will make me more marketable," he says, "and, of course, give me the degree."

Given the decline of the local automotive and manufacturing sectors, Weglarz thought hard about pursuing a new line of work. "But at my age, with all of these years in design, my school counselor and I decided it wouldn't make sense to start over in a whole new area," he says. "Plus, the skills I will learn will enable me to design other things besides auto parts. I have a friend who got a job designing surgical instruments for a firm in New York. I can see how that would be a rewarding design job."

---